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REVIEW

Margaret A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007). ISBN: 0791455149

Beginning in the mid-1980s and extending through the 1990s, feminists grappled with the question of whether postmodernism was a positive development for feminist theory. The central concern was whether the challenges presented by thinkers such as Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault—most saliently concerning the denial of a metaphysical ground for truth—would undermine the basic aims of feminist politics that depended on this ground for its own claims for justice and equality. The nature of the worry and of the stakes involved was succinctly put by Nancy Hartsock in the important collection, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (1990). “Why is it,” she asked, “that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?”¹ Feminists have by now engaged postmodern theory in innumerable ways, but Michel Foucault has been perhaps the most important single figure in feminist theorizing about issues of power, identity and embodiment ever since. This should not be surprising, for, as Susan Bordo points out, the focus on the body that came to preoccupy Foucault in his “middle” or “genealogical” period in fact coincided with feminist contentions that the “‘definition and shaping’ of the [gendered] body is ‘the focal point for struggles over the shape of power.’”² But if disagreements over whether Foucault should be regarded as friend or foe to feminism spanned almost two decades, Margaret A. McLaren’s *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* should be the last word on the usefulness of Foucault’s work for feminist theory.

McLaren’s book opens its first chapter, “The Feminism and Foucault Debate,” with an overview of the range of feminist perspectives (liberal, radical, socialist, etc.), and brief treatments of the position of each with respect to postmodern theory,

¹ Nancy Hartsock, “Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, edited by Linda Nicolson (New York: Routledge 1990), cited in McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 55.

² Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 17.

before turning to the extended engagement with what she takes to be the productive contribution of Foucault's work for feminism that occupies the rest of the book. In chapter two, "Foucault, Feminism, and Norms," she provides another kind of introduction to what she makes clear is the complex relationship between Foucault and feminism with a characteristically helpful discussion of Foucault's "ambivalent" relation to Enlightenment thought. Famous for his damning criticism of the Enlightenment postulation of a universal truth, Foucault nevertheless "endorses [the] critical impulse of the Enlightenment in the mode of thinking he calls 'critique.'"³ Prominent contemporary critics of Foucault like Jürgen Habermas or Charles Taylor cannot reconcile what appears to be Foucault's ambivalence toward truth, that is, his suspicion of a timeless truth, the very criticism of which appears itself to rely on some normative framework. But this reconciliation, McLaren explains, is precisely the project of her book, namely, to understand and apply the Foucaultian critique that has as its aim the unmasking and undermining of domination, the task she takes to be the heart of a feminist praxis.

What Foucault provides, according to McLaren, is a framework for criticizing domination that does not rely on a metaphysical ground for truth. Instead, Foucault appropriates critique, which he redefines as "the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth.... Critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected tractability."⁴ If this condemnation of domination appeals to a Kantian notion of freedom, Foucault claims that what he calls the "critical attitude" must be understood instead as "condemned to...dependency and pure heteronomy."⁵ It is, in other words, a product of history.

What then appears to be a "normative confusion" in Foucault's work, McLaren explains, "functions productively...to criticize traditional Enlightenment norms and social norms while allowing for a reconceptualization of normative notions such as freedom and critique."⁶ This reconceptualization will have important implications for understanding subjectivity, which is the focus of the third chapter, "Foucault and the Subject of Feminism." Feminist critics cast Foucault's understanding of the subject as a destruction of subjectivity or its complete determination. Either way, these accusations finally amount to the same denial of agency. Complaints such as these provide McLaren an opportunity to advance her argument for the fundamental compatibility of Foucault's theory and feminist aims. What is particularly noteworthy about this discussion is her development of a feminist engagement with Foucault's thought that extends beyond the genealogical works into the final "ethical"

³ McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 21.

⁴ Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?" in *The Political*, edited by David Ingram (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers), 194.

⁵ Foucault, "What is Critique," 192.

⁶ McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 23.

work on “care of the self.” McLaren here, as elsewhere in her wide-ranging book, is entering lightly trodden conceptual ground,⁷ anticipating and inspiring the rich development of work in this area of feminist Foucault studies which would follow in subsequent years.⁸ This analysis is notable not only for its contribution to feminist applications of Foucault, but to the development of Foucault studies more generally. In the years preceding the publication of McLaren’s book, most commentators gave the later work short shrift, and McLaren’s is among the very first works—guided, as she was, by her extensive work in the Foucault archives—to address its significance and its rightful place in Foucault’s thought.

The new direction of Foucault’s analysis marked by the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality* comes to define, McLaren writes, a different conception of subjectivity, one that “ruins” or “rejects” not the concept of the subject itself, but rather, as McLaren puts it, “a particular formation of it,”⁹ namely, the “subjectification” that is conveyed by the term *assujettissement*, the making of the subject that is also making subject. Rather than relying on Enlightenment notions of the subject, which he takes to remain active, though recast, in existentialism and phenomenology,¹⁰ Foucault turns to ancient Greek conceptions of the self. It is here that McLaren locates what she argues is the guiding thread connecting the genealogical and ethical in Foucault’s work. As she writes, Foucault’s genealogies

reveal the normalizing character of the disciplines that constitute subjectivity; this should prompt us to investigate nonnormalizing ways of existence. In Foucault’s view, refusing what we are would enable us to liberate ourselves from the type of individuality (subjectivity) that has imposed itself on us through the disciplines and practices for the last several centuries. The refusal to be what we are, to be subject and hence subjected, opens up new possibilities for being.¹¹

McLaren will return to Foucault’s final work in the sixth and final chapter, “Practices of the Self: From Self-Transformation to Social Transformation,” where she provides a compelling case for understanding the feminist movement-defining practice of consciousness raising in Foucaultian terms as a “practice of freedom.”¹² The personal and political transformation effected by consciousness-raising, she provocatively

⁷ In addition to McLaren, Ladelle McWhorter was among the very few feminist theorists to substantively engage this work. See *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

⁸ See e.g., Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges, editors, *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Cressida Heyes, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁹ McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹² *Ibid.*, 160.

suggests, may be located in the contemporary psychotherapeutic movement associated with the Australian therapist Michael White, whose work has been significantly shaped by both Foucaultian and feminist perspectives. White's narrative therapy locates individuals' problems not "in" them, as traditional psychoanalysis does, but in the subjectifying apparatus of social systems. As a result, narrative therapy understands individual change to be bound up with political change, or at least, the understanding—the deconstruction—of the messages that individuals have internalized.¹³

To apply the approach outlined here also sheds important light on the aims of the preceding chapter which focuses more specifically on "Identity Politics: Sex, Gender, and Sexuality." The very category of "Woman," as so many feminist theorists—Judith Butler most importantly—have now argued, must be understood as a normative category, one that promotes exclusion, but has also been an effective rallying point for sociopolitical change. McLaren carefully walks the reader through the discussion of identity politics that has, she writes, been problematically understood as a matter of "essentialism" (proponents of identity politics) versus "social construction" (critics of identity politics). For new students of feminism this discussion will be tremendously instructive, but it also lays the ground for McLaren's elucidating discussion of the contribution of Foucault's theory in the consolidation of the "social constructionist" critique. And yet, McLaren's discussion clarifies, in Foucaultian terms, precisely how the characterization of the debate itself is misconstrued. Even as categories of identity are exclusionary—failing, as they must, to "represent the diversity of group members"—and naturalizing—reifying the existence of "types" of people and concealing their historical production¹⁴—McLaren makes the case that this recognition can nevertheless be compatible with the strategic deployment of these categories. In Foucault's own work of course, "the homosexual" is the exemplary model of how a category of identity can be deployed to "define and subject individuals,"¹⁵ but it was also by means of this category that a resistance movement, "gay liberation," was born.¹⁶ Acknowledging Foucault's refusal to address the specific production of gender, McLaren here extends Foucault's own analysis of hermaphroditism, providing a new analysis of *Herculine Barbin*, and offers a novel treatment of the bisexual identity politics that peaked in the early 1990s.

The employment of these last examples locates McLaren's own work historically, as the situated analysis it must be. Throughout the book, McLaren offers an extremely helpful overview of the history of feminist engagement with Foucault's work that also moves feminist Foucaultian scholarship forward in ways that mark its

¹³ Ibid., 162.

¹⁴ McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 118.

¹⁵ Ibid., 122.

¹⁶ See e.g., Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 101.

own production. The discussion of bisexuality would, if published in the fast-moving landscape of sexual identity politics today, likely be a discussion of transsexuality or “trans” identities, and the discussion of intersex politics—only a few years old at the time of publication—would be far richer as that movement has matured and diversified. This is not a criticism so much as it is a caution to readers for whom the history of feminist theorizing should be marked off from the contributions McLaren here makes, which are already historical moments.

Several years after its publication, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* remains invaluable for its rendering of a thoroughgoing account of feminist theorists’ interaction with Foucault through the late 1990s. As McLaren rightly points out, no single philosopher since Marx has garnered as much attention from feminists¹⁷ and recent feminist work on Foucault¹⁸ is testament to feminists’ ongoing engagement.

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¹⁷ McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 16.

¹⁸ See e.g., Amy Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Heyes, *Self-Transformations*.